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ABSTRACT

Information on a review of the decennial review process required by the Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) for every academic department in each Arizona university is presented as part of the final report by ABOR's Task Force on Excellence, Efficiency and Competitiveness. Revision in the review process and eight policy statements are discussed, and three characteristics of a robust program review are noted: they should occur on a regular schedule; they should be conducted in a systematic fashion; and they should be comprehensive. Eleven recommendations are made by the Task Force staff, including: (1) intervals between reviews should be reduced from 10 years to a period of from 5 to 7 years; (2) ABOR should more closely monitor reviews to ensure they are responsive to the stated requirements of their review policy; (3) each university should develop procedures and guidelines for meaningful program review; (4) procedures for the use of consultants should include greater objectivity in their selection; (5) procedures for the reviews should encourage active participation of department faculty; and (6) the reviews should be used by department chairs, deans, and vice presidents for planning and resource allocation. The rationale behind and responsibility for each recommendation are discussed. (SM)

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AN EVALUATION OF THE DECENNIAL REVIEW PROCESS

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and
THE TASK FORCE STAFF

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INTRODUCTION

"A program review is a formal and systematic process that examines programs periodically over time, checks for changes, and matches program characteristics with ongoing program needs" (Ewell, 1983). During the last decade, program review has become an important part of the planning process in higher education. About one-third of all institutions of higher education now have formal program review. More than half of these have been developed since 1977 (Ewell, 1983). Given these facts, it appears that the Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) was a pioneer in this effort. Since 1975, ABOR has had a policy requiring all academic departments located in Arizona universities to undergo a substantial review process every 10 years. The policy has undergone periodic revision and is outlined in a series of policy statements:

1. The process of academic program review should be primarily internal to the university, should produce judgments regarding disciplines by colleagues, and should include an assessment of the performance and achievements of students and of the contributions of the discipline to other campus units.

2. Four to eight academic departments should be reviewed each year, with the objective of a complete review of all departments over a ten-year period.

3. An initial review (self-study) will be undertaken by faculty and administrators within each discipline. Undergraduate and graduate disciplines will also be reviewed by colleagues or administrators from outside the discipline, but within the university. Undergraduate disciplines may also be reviewed by external consultants. Graduate disciplines will be reviewed by external consultants.

4. Although departments are the basic unit for review, it is expected than some programs and curricula will be reviewed at the college level.

5. Budgetary needs for academic program reviews will be met by existing budgets of the universities.

6. Reviews will cover the areas of academic degree programs, faculty, students, physical facilities, costs, other resources and production.

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7. Summary reports will be submitted to the chair of the Academic Affairs Committee by the involved university administrator and the Regent's staff.

8. The Academic Affairs Council may make recommendations to the university presenting the academic program review. All proposals for academic program or curriculum changes resulting from the reviews will be subject to the same approval procedures required for other proposals for changes.

(Chapter II, Sec. 2-208, Board of Regents Policy Manual)

Most would agree that the three characteristics of a robust program review are 1) they should occur on a regular schedule 2) they should be conducted in a systematic fashion and 3) they should be comprehensive. Where the policies outlined by the Board are followed, robust reviews result. However, if all program reviews are to become serious ingredients in the planning process, the review process must avoid common pitfalls. Those pitfalls might include 1) problems with use of data, 2) problems in the conduct of the reviews, and 3) problems that have to do with whether or not the review results are used and how they are used.

The Task Force staff undertook a review of the process for periodic program review with the aid of a consultant, Dr. Robert Barak, Associate Director, Iowa Board of Regents, a specialist in academic program reviews. Dr. Barak spent a total of four days on site visits to the ABOR office and to the institutions. The recommendations to be presented represent the combined efforts of Dr. Barak and the Task Force staff. They were formulated following an examination of written policy statements, guidelines, self studies, consultant reports and summary reports to the Board of Regents, in addition to discussions with ABOR staff, representatives of academic vice presidents, deans, departmental chairs and faculty at the three institutions.

The current review process has many strengths including an excellent potential for strengthening academic programs, removing marginal or nonessential programs and increasing accountability to higher education constituencies. The review process is currently undergoing major revisions on all campuses with these goals in mind. However, if the goals are to be realized, there are certain shortcomings that need to be addressed. It is recognized that some of the recommendations which follow have already been implemented by some units. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the process is uneven throughout the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A statement of the goals and objectives of the academic program review effort should be incorporated into Board of Regents policy so that the Board's expectations for this effort are clear. The statement should emphasize the value of program review to the institution and to the department conducting the review.

Rationale:

The recommendation addresses the need for immediate, recognizable benefits at the institutional level and for greater incentives for full, conscientious involvement in the reviews. It should be emphasized that the reviews are done to

promote program improvement, assure maximum use of current resources and provide a basis for university planning. The purpose of the reviews appears to be unknown to many faculty, departmental level administrators, and deans. While some units and deans have used the information provided by the review process very effectively, the reviews are often viewed as an unnecessary burden placed on the institutions by the Board of Regents rather than as a means for program improvement.

Responsibility: Board of Regents

- Intervals between reviews should be reduced from ten years to a shorter period of from five to seven years.

Rationale:

Ten years is a very long time between reviews of program quality. Good programs have been known to deteriorate in just a few years, while others may emerge and not be fully recognized. The national average for periodic program reviews is five to six years.

Responsibility: Board of Regents

- Various internal and external review efforts should be integrated in order to reduce the overall burden on faculty and departmental administrators and to improve the chances of periodic program reviews being utilized. Accreditation reports normally should not be used as a substitute for periodic program reviews unless they meet all criteria for the review.

Rationale:

In some cases, institutions have been substituting accreditation reviews for the decennial review efforts. In other cases (for example, some programs at the medical school) units have escaped review altogether. There are some substantive differences between program reviews conducted by institutions and accreditation reviews conducted by outside special interest organizations. Most accreditation groups rarely address the issue of whether a program is needed in the first place, whereas an institutional review ought to consider this issue for each program area. In addition, some accreditation organizations do an excellent job of preparing site-visits, developing quality indicators and conducting the total accreditation review, while others are frequently found wanting. Because of quality differences in external accreditation processes, efforts should be made to ensure that external accreditation reviews meet all guidelines of internal program review as well as those required for the accreditation process if the review is to be substituted for the internal periodic program review.

Responsibility: Board of Regents and universities

- The Board of Regents should more closely monitor reviews to ensure that they are responsive to the stated requirements of their review policy.

Rationale:

The summary reports now submitted to the Board of Regents do not reflect the actual review process and contain little or no useful information for decision making. They should be discontinued in favor of an assessment of each review

by the Board of Regents staff. Staff reports to the Academic Affairs Council should accurately reflect the content of the reviews and the follow-up efforts required for recommendations and concerns.

The Board of Regents and the universities should clearly define data to be included in the review process and develop standardized reporting methods. For example, current Regents' policy states that the reviews "should include an assessment of the performance and achievement of students." Assessment is uneven and, under most circumstances, self serving to the program under review. Consideration should be given to the development of standardized survey instruments with surveys being conducted by experienced individuals outside of the program under evaluation.

Responsibility: Board of Regents and universities

- Each university should develop procedures and guidelines for meaningful program review. Board staff should periodically monitor the institutions to ensure that procedures and guidelines are in place and being used.

Rationale:

There appears to be a lack of familiarity with institutional guidelines by some deans, departmental chairs and faculty. Because program review processes are currently undergoing revision, the guidelines are frequently "drafts" with insufficient specificity to lead to consistent, comprehensive review of programs. As a result, considerable time is spent collecting information that is of little use in determining program quality.

Responsibility: Universities

- Policies and procedures for the reviews should emphasize a primary focus on program improvement and a secondary focus on resource requests. The recommendations contained in the reviews should be used as a starting point for the next periodic review.

Rationale:

Content of the reviews are overly focused on resource acquisition at the expense of an analysis of program improvement. Almost all note the need for more faculty, higher salaries, more/better equipment and facilities. Reviews seem to be viewed only as opportunities to seek incremental resource increases. While this can and should be a part of the self-study where appropriate, resource acquisition should not be the overriding goal.

In some instances, problems identified in the reviews, such as the lack of resources, are not addressed creatively because of inflexibility created by the perception (correct or incorrect) that more students mean more dollars. For example, some units will not propose to cap enrollments in order to reduce faculty workloads because it is perceived that support dollars are tied to the number of students enrolled. The guidelines should ask departments to review the program and suggest improvements given existing resources and faculty lines to achieve optimum quality.

Responsibility: Universities

- Procedures for the use of consultants should include greater objectivity in their selection. On-site visits and exit

interviews with department chairs and deans should be mandatory.

Rationale:

Some aspects of existing guidelines impair review objectivity. For example, outside consultants are often picked exclusively from lists submitted by the department under review. In some instances, the outside consultants never visit the campus but merely respond to a written self-study prepared by the department. This results in an under-utilization of the consultants, a reduction in the objectivity of the reviews, and the loss of an opportunity to receive observations for program improvement which are often provided during a frank, confidential exit interview with key administrators.

The possible inclusion of a "generalist" consultant,a non-peer to the department but knowledgeable about administration of reviews should be considered. Consideration should also be given to providing consultants with information on where a department under review fits into the overall mission and goals of the university and the college. This may help overcome the problem of consultants developing unrealistic recommendations for a given unit.

Responsibility: Universities and departments

- Procedures for the reviews should encourage active participation of department faculty. Each member should have the opportunity to review the completed self-study, consultant reports, and institutional oversight committee reports.

Rationale:

In some instances, faculty in a department being reviewed do not actively participate in the reviews and do not have an opportunity to see, much less discuss the review results.

Responsibility: Universities and departments

- Undergraduate and graduate programs should be given equal emphasis in the periodic program review. Restructuring of university oversight committees and a change in ABOR policy statement number 3 may be required to ensure than this occurs.

Rationale:

Undergraduate programs are sometimes ignored and are often superficially covered. In some cases this is true of both the self-studies and the consultant reports.This may be a result of the graduate level emphasis of the reviews, for in some instances the reviews are conducted under the general supervision of the graduate dean. ABOR policy statement number 3 can also be interpreted as emphasizing graduate rather than undergraduate programs.

Responsibility: Universities and departments

- The reviews should be used by department chairs, deans and vice presidents for planning and resource allocation.

Rationale:

While some periodic reviews represent some of the most extensive and best compilation of information on programs,

they appear to be used infrequently outside the department for planning and budgeting purposes. Follow-up on recommendations by the dean and vice presidential levels appears to be rare. Schedules of reviews need to mesh effectively with other elements of university strategic decision-making cycles for planning and budgeting.

Responsibility: Universities

- Financial, data gathering and analysis, and clerical assistance should be provided to departments undergoing reviews.

Rationale:

A comprehensive, effective, program review is a strain on a departmental operating budget. Financial incentives must be created to encourage departments to undertake certain activities to improve the quality of the review. For example, meaningful surveys are not inexpensive. For some units, the expense of such surveys would decimate the operations budget. Often departmental expertise is lacking for conducting surveys and interpreting the data.

Responsibility: Board or Regents and universities